

Small Changes

Big Results

Strengthening Families Washington
Spring 2006 – Fall 2008

strengthening families
THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION







Early Learning

All eyes are on Washington

What is Early Learning?

Every human develops his or her most crucial capacities in the earliest months and years of life.

Early learning is about optimizing this development for every child by improving the quality of care for infants and young children, and by supporting and promoting successful parenting.

In the field of early childhood care and education, all eyes are on Washington. In the last five years, our state has created a new Department of Early Learning, launched an innovative public/private partnership called Thrive by Five, invested in a progressive expansion of all-day kindergarten, and set out on a long-term path towards improving the quality of child care and early learning programs.

This interest and investment in early learning is the result of dramatic new research about early brain development and its impact on the trajectory of every human life. In the earliest months and years of life, every human being develops his or her most crucial capacities: the capacity to learn, to give and receive love, to feel compassion for others, to cope with frustration, to communicate, and to experience wholeness and happiness.

All these capacities are needed for success in school and in life. In Washington, we have focused especially on the importance of school readiness, because the evidence is overwhelming: kids who start school ready for kindergarten are far more likely to graduate from high school, and to pursue the post-secondary education they will need to support their own families in the 21st century. Our new investments in early care and learning are truly an attempt to "pay it forward" for the next generation.

The explosion of research on early learning is changing the way we think about how to care for infants and young children, and how we support and promote successful parenting. It is also stimulating new thinking about how to take advantage of increased investment and interest in early learning to more effectively prevent child abuse and neglect.

Preventing child abuse and neglect

For the last 40 years, preventing child abuse and neglect has focused on parenting education and support programs, and raising public awareness about what not to do: never shake a baby, never leave a child unattended in a car, don't forget to get inoculations, don't get pregnant if you're a teenager. Strategies focused on addressing risks, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities, and for the most part, these efforts were aimed at individual change rather than the larger-scale changes needed in communities and in policy.

For many years, preventing child abuse and neglect has been seen as a specialized activity, separate from the child welfare, protective services, child care and early learning systems that serve young children. In Washington, the mission of preventing child abuse and neglect is assigned to a small state agency that has operated separately from (but now serves as a bridge between) both the child welfare and early learning and child care systems. From outside these systems, the Council for Children and Families (formerly the Washington Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) has provided grants and programmatic support to a variety of community-based prevention programs, conducted public awareness campaigns, provided information and technical assistance, and promoted partnerships, collaborations, and innovative marketing strategies to stretch resources and engage stakeholders.

What really works?

Over the years, there has been scant research on what really works in child abuse prevention. In fact, there has actually been more research on how to effectively rehabilitate juvenile delinquents than on how to prevent the adverse childhood experiences that often lead to delinquency.

The one clear, research-based guidepost for effective child abuse and neglect and prevention has been the groundbreaking work of J. David Hawkins, Ph.D. and Richard F. Catalano, Ph.D. at the University of Washington who, over ten years ago, developed the framework of “risk and protective factors” that describe the conditions that most strongly influence children’s development.

Washington Council for Children and Families

In 1982, Washington became the first in the nation to create a state agency focused solely on the prevention of child abuse and neglect. For more than 25 years, the agency was known as the Washington Council for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (WCPCAN) but was recently renamed the Council for Children and Families to better reflect the breadth and scope of work that is reflected in the agency’s mission and vision.

Mission:

To promote the optimal development of children and families by leading Washington State in its efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect before it ever occurs.

Vision:

A collaborative community in which parents and caregivers are supported in their efforts to ensure that children grow, thrive and learn in safe, loving and healthy environments.

For more information:

www.wcpcan.wa.gov

The graph below shows the program strategies used by exemplary programs to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect.

How early childhood programs help prevent child abuse and neglect

Excellent early care and education programs use common program strategies to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect.

QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Program Strategies That:

- Facilitate friendships and mutual support
- Strengthen parenting
- Respond to family crises
- Link families to services and opportunities
- Facilitate children's social and emotional development
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect
- Value and support parents

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Parental resilience
Social connections
Knowledge of parenting and child development
Concrete support in times of need
Social and emotional competence of children

**Prevention
of child abuse
and neglect**

These risk and protective factors provide a powerful and effective guide to thinking about what children need, and how child-serving agencies can be more effective. But while these risk and protective factors represent a very important advance, there has been insufficient investment in corollary research that would pinpoint the most effective strategies for reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors for young children.

In the absence of such research, the practice of child abuse and neglect prevention has struggled to find ways to extend its reach and define its impact.

While the protective factor framework has guided the Washington Council for Children and Families' investments in community-based child abuse prevention for a decade, gaining traction for use of the protective factor framework outside of a narrowly defined child abuse prevention arena has proved challenging.





A Turning Point

In 2001, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation challenged the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to come up with new, research-based child abuse and neglect prevention strategies that could reach millions of children and families.

What CSSP developed has proved to be a turning point in our approach to prevention of child abuse and neglect. Where previous approaches to prevention focused on identifying and serving individual families with multiple risk factors that made child maltreatment likely, the new approach is based on a much broader, more universal strategy for building the protective factors that promote healthy families and safety for all children, in all communities.

How early learning and child care providers can help prevent abuse and neglect: building a network of protective factors around children and families

Research on early brain development spotlighted the importance of high quality early learning and child care programs. The CSSP study took that concept one step further by exploring the role that early learning and child care programs could play in preventing child abuse and neglect – not by focusing on risk, but by incorporating practices that build protective factors for all children and families.

The CSSP study identified five key protective factors that could be bolstered by child care and early learning programs:

- **Parental resilience:** Parents are able to develop and sustain caring relationships, sustain faith in their own potential, cope with adversity, and keep a positive outlook on life.
- **Social connections:** Parents are connected with other parents, extended families, supportive institutions and community resources.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** Parents are knowledgeable about what to expect as children grow, and how to provide effective discipline and guidance that promotes healthy development.
- **Specific help in times of need:** Parents – especially those who are low-income – know how to get help to overcome a financial or family crisis, or to access mental health care or substance abuse treatment.

- **Healthy social and emotional development of children:** Children who are socially and emotionally healthy present fewer challenging behaviors that make parenting difficult, so helping both parents and child care providers understand how to promote social and emotional health is critical.

To build these protective factors, CSSP proposed that early care and education providers adjust their programs to facilitate friendship and mutual support among parents, strengthen parenting skills, respond to family crises, link families to services they need, facilitate children's social and emotional development, and observe and respond to early warning signs of abuse or neglect. Key to all of these strategies is valuing parents and viewing parents – not just their children – as primary “customers” of early care and learning programs.

Many high-quality child care and early learning programs already do this – but many do not. And among those who do, the attention to these key protective factors and the strategies that bolster them may wax and wane depending on the inclinations of staff and leadership, and the constraints of time and resources.

What CSSP sought – and what the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and other funders now support – is a system-wide approach that aims to integrate practices in all child care and early learning programs that intentionally and effectively strengthen families and bolster these protective factors.

To do this, child care providers – and others who work with young children – will need professional development, policy support, closer collaboration, and a long-term commitment to incorporating these simple ideas into the conventional wisdom about how we care for and protect children from harm.

Key to all of these strategies is valuing parents and viewing – *parents* – not just their children – as primary “customers” of early care and learning programs.





Strengthening Families

The strengths of these small but significant changes in child care and early learning programs were quickly apparent.

These changes were doable, affordable, and widely supported by parents, child care and early learning providers and policymakers.

This breakthrough strategy, called Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education (or, more simply, Strengthening Families), began by developing tools to help early child care centers and early learning programs such as Head Start make small but critical changes that would incorporate evidence-based protective factors for young children by working with their families in a new way.

In 2005, seven pilot states began to implement the Strengthening Families approach. For two years these states built collaboration among early childhood programs, child abuse prevention, and child protective services, and began to incorporate intentional practices that bolster parent, family, and child protective factors. These states are now working to incorporate these practices in home-based child care as well as early learning programs and child care centers.

The new practices include systemic efforts to engage parents with each other and with their child care or early learning providers, to offer more support for parenting, and to provide families with greater access to help in times of need. The pilots also focused on new ways to promote the healthy social and emotional development of children, and to share that focus with parents.

The strengths of these small but significant changes in child care and early learning programs were quickly apparent. These changes were doable, affordable, and widely supported by both child care and early learning providers and policymakers.

Because of the early successes achieved by the Strengthening Families pilots, the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds began promoting the strategy to its national network, which includes Washington's Council for Children and Families.

The Washington Council for Children and Families convened a group of early learning and parent leaders to develop a state strategy. This group subsequently became the statewide steering committee for the initiative. Early on, the group decided to use the state's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems plan, Kids Matter, as a framework for its efforts, to ensure that Washington's Strengthening Families work aligned with and leveraged other, ongoing systems change initiatives.

Thoughtful planning by committed individuals from a variety of systems and perspectives – including, importantly, parent leaders – paid off. In January, 2007, Washington was selected as one of 22 states to receive start-up funds from the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds to begin piloting the Strengthening Families approach.

Work in Washington has proceeded at two levels: from the ground up, and from the top down.

At the ground level, ten early care and education pilot sites participated with self-assessments, skill-building, and initial implementation to build knowledge of what works and to promote a protective factor approach in their programs.

At the system level, the steering committee of statewide partners and parent leaders has focused on ways to embed the protective factor framework and Strengthening Families approaches in existing systems.

On both levels, the focus has been on building on the strengths and opportunities provided by already existing structures.

The Evidence

Strengthening Families is based on extensive and rigorous research, conversations with hundreds of professionals in child- and family-focused fields, and input from an advisory panel of experts in early childhood and abuse and neglect prevention. These are summarized in the following documents, all of which are available on the Evidence section of the electronic library at the national Strengthening Families website, <http://strengtheningfamilies.net>.

- A literature review on child abuse and neglect prevention
- A study of exemplary early childhood programs that are building Protective Factors
- An exploration of seven program strategies that early care and education centers use to build Protective Factors and other programmatic elements employed by the centers studied
- Sharon Lynn Kagan's paper on early childhood infrastructure and an executive summary
- Deborah Daro's paper on child abuse and neglect prevention, and its accompanying table
- Conversations with the national expert advisory panel
- A Power Point presentation describing the research behind Strengthening Families

Further Learning

The following documents are also useful in understanding the Strengthening Families approach:

- A list of resources on the economic impact of early childhood education
- A longitudinal study of the impact of early care and education (Reynolds, et al.) that shows a 51% decline in child maltreatment

What is Strengthening Families?

The Strengthening Families approach seeks to create a child abuse and neglect prevention framework that can help program developers, policymakers, and advocates embed effective prevention strategies into existing systems.

It begins with shifting the focus of child abuse and neglect prevention efforts from family risks and deficits to family strengths and resiliency. This approach builds and strengthens the 'protective factors' that are known to prevent abuse and neglect.

Research indicates that the existence of protective factors strongly influences children's healthy development, including their capacity to learn, give and receive love, feel compassion for others, cope with frustration, communicate, and experience wholeness and happiness.

The Strengthening Families approach aims to create a widespread understanding of what all kinds of programs and providers can do – and in some cases already do – to promote healthy child development and reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

- The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, which examines the impact of trauma on child development
- The Fragile Families Research Brief, which explores linkages between child care centers and community resources
- The NAEYC Crosswalk showing how NAEYC Accreditation Standards for early care and education centers relate to the Protective Factors

Strengthening Families Washington

Steering Committee Members / Partner Organizations

Karen Anderson – Washington PAVE (Parents are Vital in Education)
Director, Parent Training and Information

Vaughnetta J. Barton – Foundation for Early Learning
Director of Programs

Agda Burchard – Washington Assoc. for the Education of Young Children
Executive Director

Annie Cubberly – Child Care Action Council
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Executive Director

Joan Sharp, Lead – Council for Children and Families
Executive Director

Helen Jones, Coordinator – Jones Consulting

This work links the science of early brain development and emerging research on the importance of family involvement for children to thrive with an infrastructure that can bring the work of preventing child abuse and neglect to scale in communities across our state.



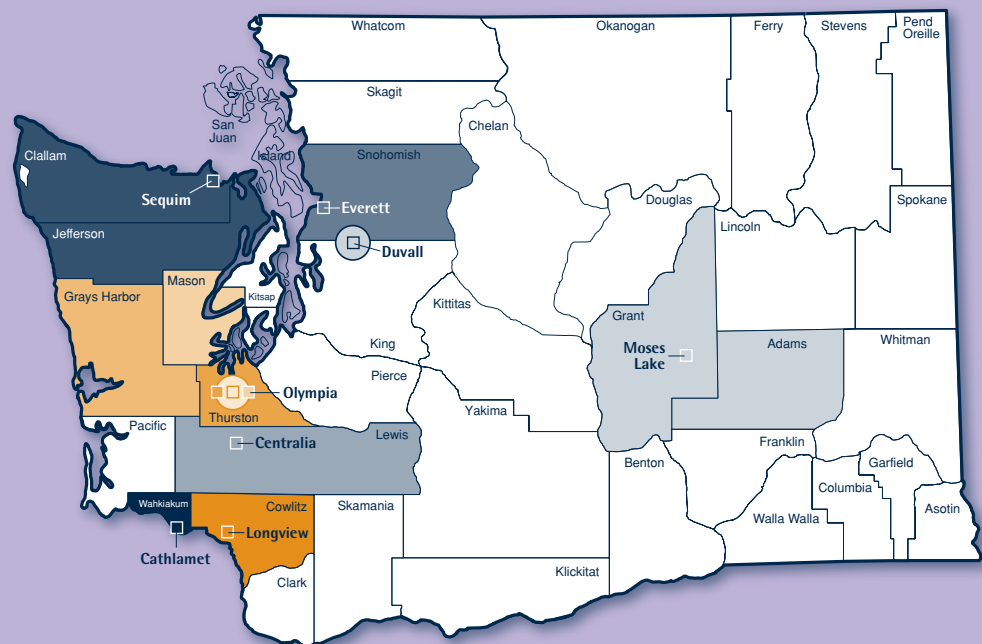
The Experience of Pilot Sites

The ten child care and early learning pilot sites selected to participate in Strengthening Families Washington were diverse in location, size, programs and services.

Parents are paramount

Because the perspective of parents is paramount, pilot site teams consisted of a parent with a child in the program and a staff representative. These teams served as the catalyst for change at each site.

Strengthening Families Pilot Sites



Facility Location and Service Areas

Cathlamet	St. James Family Center, Wahkiakum Co. and Neselle, Pacific Co.
Longview	Lower Columbia College Head Start/ECEAP, Cowlitz, Co.
Centralia	Centralia College Child Care Center and ECEAP Program, Lewis Co., South Thurston Co., Grays Harbor Co.
Olympia	Olympia Early Learning Center, Thurston Co.
Olympia	St. Mike's Tikes Early Learning Center, Olympia
Olympia	ESD 113 Sound to Harbor Head Start/ECEAP, Mason Co., Grays Harbor Co., Thurston Co.
Sequim	Olympic Community Action Program Early Childhood Services, Jefferson Co., and Clallam Co.
Everett	Snohomish Co. ECEAP, Snohomish Co.
Duvall	Family Child Care and Preschool, Duvall
Moses Lake	Big Bend Community College Family Literacy, Grant Co., Adams Co.

Profile of Strengthening Families WA Pilot Series

Program Name	Head Start	ECEAP	Other	Program Information Regarding Children and Families Served							
				Geographic Area Served	Age of Children	Income Range	ESL	Disability Status	Teen Parents	Foster Children	Substance Abuse
Big Bend Community College Family Literacy Programs, Moses Lake			Literacy, EDE and Migrant Even Start	Grant and Adams Co. (4 centers total)	0–12 yrs.	Under \$12K	All parents in 3 of 4 sites in ESL	Kids with IEPs served in 3 of 4 sites	None currently	Children in foster care served in 1 of 4 sites	Some
Centralia College Child Care Center and ECEAP Programs, Centralia		X	Lab School	Lewis, South Thurston, Grays Harbor Counties	4 wks. – 6 yrs.	Low-middle	Yes, many of the parents	Yes, some	42 students in campus TEEN program	Yes	Yes
ESD 113 Sound to Harbor Head Start/ECEAP, Aberdeen	X	X		Mason, Grays Harbor, Thurston Counties (MVC-GH Co)	3–5 yrs.	MVC 0–26K	10 children and families	Dev't delay	None currently	One child	One currently
Family Child Care and Preschool, Duvall	X		Private		3 mos. – 9 yrs. (licensed 0–12 yrs.)	\$50–\$100K per year	No	Speech and/or Occ. therapy for 2 kids	Previously, not currently	Previously, not currently	2 families (aware of)
Lower Columbia College Head Start/ECEAP, Longview	X	X			3–5 yrs.	At or below FPL	43 families	45 kids with IEPs, 36 kids referred for further eval.	18	21	35
Olympic Community Action Program Early Childhood Services, Sequim		X			0–5 yrs.	90% of families under FPL	5% of kids	42 kids qualify for Disability Services (24%)	Unknown, if any	14	26
Olympia Early Learning Center, Olympia		X			4 wks. – K	Over 50% are low-moderate income, the rest are middle	Yes	None mentioned	2	2 plus several foster parents served	6 families from the "Harvest" outpatient SA program through Beh. Health Res.
St. James Family Center, Rosburg		X			3–5 yrs.	All are below 110% of FPL unless kids have learning or speech disability	No	8 of 70 students	None currently	None currently	15–20%
St. Mike's Tikes Early Learning Center, Olympia			Crisis Nursery		18 mos. – 12 yrs.	\$200–\$1500 per mo.	6%	18%	10%	3%	10%
Snohomish County ECEAP, Everett	X	X			3–5 yrs.	95% of families at or below 95% of FPL (55% below 80% FPL)	28%	4%	5% currently, 28% were teens when child was born	5%	20% (1 in 5)

Washington's pioneer pilot sites for Strengthening Families

The sites were selected in November, 2006 based on their responses to a state-wide Request for Qualifications. Their work proceeded over a term of 16 months, as follows.

- December, 2006: The Strengthening Families Coordinator visited pilot sites to offer technical assistance and guidance. Teams familiarized themselves with the Strengthening Families Guidebook and shared it with others at their site who would be involved in the Initiative.
- March, 2007: Pilot site teams gathered for their first retreat to explore how to build protective factors in their work with families. The self-assessment – an extensive questionnaire to help programs identify leverage points for enhancing protective factors among families – was reviewed. Each pilot agreed to complete it and to engage parents and staff in the process.

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Completing the self-assessment started a real dialogue among staff and parents that we want to continue.

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Just with the self-assessment we learned there was quite a difference between the services parents understand we offer as compared to what staff knows. We thought parents knew much more about the program and services. We learned we had not communicated well enough.

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Quality Early Care and Education

Program Strategies Used by Exemplary Programs to Build Protective Factors

1. Facilitate friendships
2. Strengthen parenting
3. Respond to family crises
4. Link families to services and opportunities
5. Facilitate children's social and emotional development
6. Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect
7. Value and support parents

It is important to note that most of these strategies can be implemented without creating new staff positions, making significant changes to existing facilities, or raising additional resources. One of the most important factors in implementing the Strengthening Families approach in early care and education settings is to send the clear and consistent message that the program cares about whole families, not just children, and through this process, early care and education programs can support and strengthen families and provide special help to those that may be at risk of abuse and neglect.

Self Assessment: The Strengthening Families Approach

The Self Assessment is the primary tool of the Strengthening Families approach. Based on a field study of 21 exemplary Strengthening Families programs, the Self Assessment is designed to help early care and education professionals identify concrete and practical ways of incorporating the Strengthening Families model in their day-to-day work. The Self Assessment materials are based on the seven strategies used by exemplary programs to support families.

For more information on the materials and tools utilized in the Self Assessment, visit the electronic library of the Strengthening Families National website:

http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net/index.php/main_pages/electronic_library/category/tools/

- April – June 2007: Pilot sites completed the self-assessment and identified the strategies that would be their focus. Four sites chose to focus on Strategy #1; four sites focused on both Strategies #1 and 2; one site chose Strategies 1-3, and one site decided to tackle all seven strategies at once. Action plans were developed to implement new approaches and activities.
- June – September 2007: Programs that were open during the summer began trials of new approaches and activities.
- October 2007: A second retreat was held, and site teams shared early experiences and were introduced to new tools, such as the Community Café.

Community Cafés: Changing the Lives of Children through Conversations that Matter

Our values

1. Meaningful conversation that facilitates positive change
2. The inalienable right of every child to the five protective factors necessary to thrive

Our Knowledge Base

The stepping stool we always utilize to reach for higher heights has three legs:

1. **The 5 Protective Factors:** I will continue to have courage during stress or after a crisis; I can access basic needs when I need them; Parenting is part natural and part learned; I have people who know me and at least one person who supports my parenting; My children feel loved, like they belong, and they can get along with others. (This leg is inspired by the Illinois Family Partnership Network's Parent Café model. www.ifpn.org)
2. **Leadership:** All significant social change requires leadership development and leadership is a team effort. Relying heavily on the leadership development model developed by Kouzes and Posner, we discuss the leadership skills we employ to produce positive change including: how to challenge the process, motivate, inspire, and encourage ourselves, our children and families and others in our community. (Kouzes/Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 2005.)
3. **Parent Partnership:** Significant social change requires partnerships throughout the ecological model. Community Cafés facilitate parent voice to impact policy and programs to better provide protective factors for children and families. Conversations focus on the developmental stages of partnerships with parents and create a container for parent and program action.



Our Action

The World Café technique harvests collective knowledge and transforms it into action. (Juanita Brown, *The World Café*, Berret-Koehler, 2005.) Community Cafés are planned, led and monitored by trained parents who learn the World Café process, can relate to the participants and build on the assets of their neighborhood. Parents host cafés with the intent of mentoring other parents who become hosts themselves to form more café groups. Group-building traditions, customs, visuals, foods, music and problem solving techniques from the cultures represented in each café, help to ensure cultural relevance. Meaningful relationships develop as parents and community partners participate as equals in a café series that sustains a value of reciprocity. Funding provides support for mileage, childcare, meals and a stipend for the training, planning and hosting time. This support ensures all participants can attend without concern that their participation is taking away precious resources from their family.

- October 2007 – January 2008: Pilot sites continue to refine approaches and activities.
- January – February 2008: Pilot sites collected feedback from families and staff, and revisited self-assessments to discern changes resulting from their efforts.
- March 2008: A third retreat was held for pilot site teams to discuss promising approaches and activities with the steering committee.

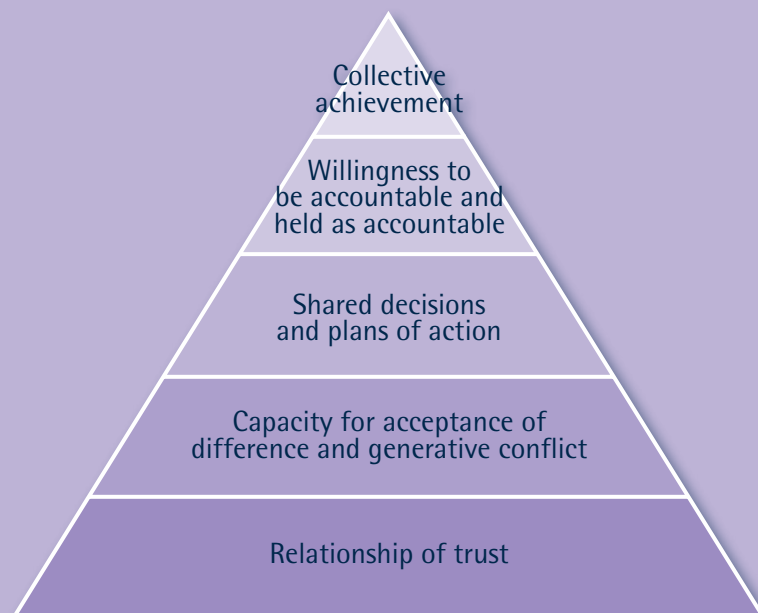
Promising approaches and actions

Actions undertaken by the ten pilot sites varied. Their experiences verify that there is no single plan of action for success; rather actions must be tailored to each program's situation and to the conditions of the families they serve.

Building trust-based relationships

The overarching approach that consistently results in success, however, does not vary. For staff in early learning to strengthen protective factors with the families they serve, relationships among staff and families must be trust-based. A trust-based relationship is engendered when genuineness, respect and empathy are present. When others are approached as fundamentally worthy, there is predisposition to identify strengths. A tendency to reciprocate in kind develops. This, in turn, leads to commitment and hope, and ultimately achievement.

Relationship of Trust and Achievement



From: Lencioni, P (2002). The five dysfunctions of a team. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass





Small Changes, Big Results

The challenge for the ten pilot sites in Washington was to make small changes that would produce significant results. The list that follows includes the practices sites found most promising.

Strengthening relationships between parents and staff

- **Consider the family your customer.** Several providers said they had previously considered the child their focus. As a result of their engagement in Strengthening Families, they shifted thinking and are "seeing with new eyes" what they consider to be their work. One said, "It got me thinking about what I do differently."
- **Warmly greet every parent and child by name.** If the classroom teacher is occupied, other staff or administrators assume responsibility for acknowledging parents and children. The providers implementing this practice reported more parents lingering for conversations with staff and other parents.
- **Move classroom sign-sheets, so that parents enter the room to sign their child in and out.** The added time was found to be just enough for a personal greeting or to share something about the child's day. The providers implementing this practice found parents seemed more comfortable in the classroom and with the teacher.
- **Initiate casual conversation with each parent to create opportunities for sharing.** The provider implementing this practice made a point to briefly ask each parent about their day and/or to share something about their child's day. As a parent in one center reported, "One thing the center wants is for you to have a voice so that you feel okay about walking into school and telling the teacher or principal what your child needs. [What is happening here is that parents are gaining the ability to] speak out for their children and for other children." The intent was to generate the habit of conversation among parents and staff. The provider implementing this practice found once there was a pattern of conversation established, more difficult topics were easier to address.
- **Keep a classroom log of important occurrences, incidents and accomplishments.** In the center implementing this practice, classroom teachers were part-time and worked one of three shifts. The log facilitated communication among staff, resulting in smoother transitions, and also facilitated communication



between staff and parents. Staff reported fewer instances of being surprised by questions from parents, and greater ability to share accomplishments and events from the children's day with parents.

- **Install white boards for staff and parents to post news about what children are learning and information about events and assistance needed.** The centers implementing this change learned that parents did not frequently write on the white boards, but did read them. Information staff included on the boards tended to generate conversation with and among parents.
- **Create opportunities for dialog among parents and staff.** Several sites reported that the self-assessment created the opportunity for real dialogue among staff and parents. One site team member reported that "Staff would say, 'we are doing this parent education activity,' and the parents would reply, 'Yes, but what we really want is a friend.' Once the parents felt heard, they really started working together with the staff."

Facilitating friendships and mutual support among parents

- **Use early care settings to connect isolated and overwhelmed parents.** Self-assessments at several sites indicated that the most important quality missing for parents was connection with other parents. Parents wanted support systems and friendships. In the words of one parent, "All parents have stress...parenting is hard." Another said, "It's not good to bring children up in isolation. Building community is a need, not an option."
- **Conduct Community Cafés to create an open and accepting space for conversation, to help overcome isolation among parents, to expand knowledge of resources and family networks and to encourage parent leadership.** Centers using the Community Café model reported enthusiastic participation from parents and recognition among parents of the valuable resource they were to each other. One parent-facilitator said, "It's just our way of starting our social justice movement around parent leadership and changing the ways that families interact within their own families, in their communities and in broader systems."
- **Use the Community Café model with Policy Council meetings.** One pilot that has several sites held a program-wide Policy Council meeting via video conference. Council members gathered in three locations. During the small group conversation phase of the Café, microphones were muted to enable each location to separately explore specific issues. Following the small group discussion, microphones were turned back on and each geographic site shared significant points with the larger network. The provider who organized the video conference reported joyfully on the animation of the parent groups as they each shared what had transpired in their separate cafes. Clearly, the process was engaging.
- **Establish a comfortable space in early learning centers for families to talk.** Centers reporting frequent use of such a space have comfortable seating, refreshments, materials about community services and parenting, and are

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The Community Café is the best tool found for getting parents engaged. As a parent, I don't want to always repeat everything I experienced. The Community Café gave me a place to reflect, and as a result of the reflection, parent more consciously.

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– Parent, Olympia

accessible by staff as well as parents. Spaces often included a computer and sometimes computer-aided courses such as English as a second language.

- **In partnership with parents, create activities that everyone enjoys and from which learning emerges.** Abandon the notion that activities involving parents are only a vehicle for providers to impart knowledge. The focus might be team building or child development, but the learning results from activity and sharing, not lecturing. One pilot site reported "the payoff" after a parent night that had focused on games and competitive challenges – a focus that brought dads out in numbers. "One father said, 'I can't remember when I last saw my wife laugh that hard.' One of the kids said, 'That's the first time I ever played a game with my dad.'"
- **Publish annual parent directories.** Sites that publish directories report more mutual support among parents, including requests for assistance such as picking up a child or arranging play date.
- **Use displays to stimulate conversation and build a sense of community.**
 - On their "birthday board" each month, one site posted pictures of children with birthdays. They decided not to include the birth date, and observed that the missing information served to entice parents into conversation.
 - A board was created to honor the children graduating from the program. The pictures created interest, conversation and a sense of camaraderie among parents.
 - Bulletin boards were also used to highlight families, and for children to share proud moments, events or just everyday occurrences with their family.
- **Schedule graduations, potlucks, family activity nights such as bowling and pizza, barbecue and yard games, movie and popcorn afternoons, a piñata party, or special guest events.** As with other activities, it is not enough to just organize the event. When successful, staff members were committed to creating comfortable, safe and inviting environments for families to get acquainted. Sites instituting these events found parents appreciated these opportunities to socialize and network with other parents. Several reported that parents were setting play dates and assisting one another in other ways following such activities.
- **Use alumni parents who are familiar with programs as volunteer interpreters.** The program that used this practice provided training on interpretation to alumni who wanted to volunteer. Issues such as confidentiality were also addressed. Alumni parents were familiar with the program, centers, and services, and knew what it was like to have a child enrolled. The use of alumni was well received by parents and staff alike.

Strengthening parenting

- **Create opportunities for parents to connect with other parents.** In one program, a parent organized a moms' night out. In another, there was a walking club for the Spanish-speaking parents. There were also pizza and bowling

nights. One provider shared the observation that "connecting people socially also supports parents becoming advocates [for their children]." A parent at another center commented that the support of other parents at the center has helped her become a better mother.

- **Create opportunities to share experience, not just expertise.** One pilot site representative said that when she started her career in early learning, parents "were totally unimpressed to know I had graduated from college with high honors in child psychology. They cared a lot more about the fact that I had a young child... [or later] that I had four kids in six years... They knew I was speaking from experience."
- **Respect what parents say they would like to learn.** There is significant emphasis in several pilot sites on parent education, but not in the format of lecturing people about how to parent. Some pilot sites invited parents to organize and lead meetings. One provider offered a video series for parents on gender communication. Another provider organized a kids-and-dads game night that included time for dads to talk with each other about parent issues. Participation in these parent-identified events was high.
- **Encourage parents to generate ideas on how to increase opportunities to visit and volunteer in their children's classroom, and follow up on them.** Parent-initiated activities included grandparent teas, lunch with dad, and sharing skills such as woodworking, cooking, painting or music. In response to a question about the most important thing that could be done with parents, one parent said, "Convey that they are here for a reason; that they have talent to be successful and that you can see their strengths and the good qualities..."
- **Working with parents, organize activities and events to acknowledge and celebrate families and children.** At one site, parents created "memory books" from pictures of their child throughout the year. Another program asked children to share photographs of family events. One pilot site combined a meal with nutrition and scrap booking. "Parents," said the provider about the memory books, "would come in and spend hours sifting through the photographs and putting together their books while talking to other parents."
- **Design parent meetings around a family activity such as team building or communication.** Several pilots found that engaging parents in activities resulted in more insight and learning than traditional curriculum-driven parent education. A staff member of one pilot site reported extremely high parent participation in such events. She said she remembered the resistance she had felt as a parent to attending required parent education sessions. She also remembered sessions she found rejuvenating and supportive. She used these experiences to coach her colleagues.
- **Organize parent meetings so that multiple topics can be addressed.** One program created table topics for parent discussions. Resource people sat at each table so parents could wander from table to table for conversation.

- **Create a lending library.** One pilot creating a library for parents that includes DVDs, books and take-home activities in languages spoken in the homes of families.
- **Hold annual open houses for families with activities and roundtable conversations on topics of interest.** Two pilot sites organized open houses with several activity areas and roundtable conversations on topics of interest so that parents could wander and engage in the activities that interested them.

Linking families to services and opportunities

- **Develop regular and dependable ways to share information about community services and opportunities in newsletters.** Most sites have newsletters, and they are including more information about services such as food banks and social services. But newsletters aren't always the best way to communicate, especially where parents speak different languages. Some parents also prefer electronic communication. For instance, a family preschool provider commented that even though she published a newsletter, it was important for her to use the means of communication best suited to each parent. As a result, she also e-mailed one dad the calendar of events from the newsletter.
- **Create resource rooms or corners where information about community services such as clothing banks, food banks, public library reading hours, community events, ESL and other classes of interest, and combating family violence and substance abuse is available.** Materials are provided in the languages spoken in the homes of families. One program representative reported more conversation with parents about resources and many more questions. She said, "They didn't know what to ask for when all the resource materials were behind doors." Another provider commented that she knew the resource area was used because they were "constantly restocking brochures" and that parents were "asking questions with a brochure in hand."
- **Create opportunities to collaborate with other community services.** One center delivered food boxes to families along the preschool bus route as children were taken home. This same center is based in a rural area and housed in a community center with other community-service programs. Co-location with a computer lab, the WIC program and psychologist, among others, makes it easier for families to utilize them.
- **Schedule regular field trips and emphasize parent participation.** Sites used fieldtrips to the county fair, the library, and a local farm as opportunities for family play as well as learning.

Facilitating children's social and emotional development

- **Create opportunities for children to contribute to the well-being of others with activities such as singing for seniors, or putting together food baskets.** As one pilot site reported, "It's an opportunity for children to develop leadership skills and to develop a practice of giving back. And, parents participate too, so it extends the opportunity to them as well. It becomes a family opportunity."

“

What we learned is that effort in one place can raise the bar of expectation throughout the program. The important thing may not be where you start – but, rather that you start.

”

– Provider, Longview

- Use a streamlined developmental checklist for assessing child development and to facilitate sharing children's accomplishments and proposing ideas for assistance where needed. Private and non-Head Start/ECEAP pilot sites found checklists helpful. One pilot site representative said when she completed an assessment for a young boy, she found he was much further along in his development than she had assumed from casual observation. The tool, she said, allowed her to share much more about what was going well with the boy's parents.
- Use spring parent conferences and other occasions to encourage parents to set play dates with their child's friends. During spring parent conferences, staff of one program made a point to share with parents who their child's friends were and to suggest summer play dates.

Providing staff support and development and program advocacy

- Provide a staff orientation to Strengthening Families to open conversations about how all staff can infuse the principles of Strengthening Families in their work. A couple of the pilot sites integrated an introduction to Strengthening Families in their all-staff meetings. Both reported that doing so initiated an ongoing conversation.
- Use daily conversations about families experiencing stress as opportunities to deepen providers' understanding of the principles of Strengthening Families. At the pilot site that adopted this practice, the provider representative shared the challenge of maintaining a "stand" for Strengthening Families approach and the reward of watching as others joined her. "What's that quote?" she asked. "It only takes one...?"
- Expand staff knowledge of children and family-serving agencies and organizations. At one pilot site, training was conducted by Child Protective Services and law enforcement on what happens after a report of suspected child abuse or neglect is made. Other pilot sites invited various community and family services to be guest speakers at staff meetings. Staff of these programs reported feeling they could be of more support to families in need.
- Convene staff study groups on specific topics of interest. One pilot convened a book group for staff members interested in learning how to conduct Community Cafés using the World Café book as the focus. It was this pilot that used the model for their video-conferenced Policy Council meeting. Future plans include using the model for exploring whether and how to merge operations between centers or what configuration would be best for the community. The team reported that the Community Café, was a "very versatile and effective tool for exploring and bridging differences between people."
- Create opportunities for staff to explore issues. One pilot site used the Community Café model at a staff meeting to explore organizational development topics.

“

We learned that we were not doing a good job of setting up formal and informal communication and support mechanisms among parents, and that we didn't provide opportunities to develop community-like celebrations, family activities or special programs. We learned that parents wanted these kinds of opportunities! There is so much more to early learning than... well, the early learners.

”

– Provider, Olympia

- **Offer in-depth staff training on cultural diversity.** One pilot site focused its engagement in Strengthening Families on cultural diversity, using a broad definition of culture. They incorporated listening and storytelling as powerful ways to establish trust-based relationships. At the conclusion of the pilot period, staff asked parents if they had noticed a difference in the way they were approached, and parents reported tearfully that they certainly had.
- **Engage staff in tracking progress and change.** Some sites created staff action plans for implementing Strengthening Families. These plans were tracked with peers. Staff gathered for an in-service day to share what they had committed to in their action plans, their experiences as they implemented actions, and to coach each other for further development. They created a support system for staff, and staff were invigorated by it.
- **Employ parents in appropriate positions.** The parent partner of one pilot site was a student in a community college early learning program, and became an employee of the early learning center. Her peer relationship with other staff and parents created many opportunities for her to share the Strengthening Families principles and to lead by example.

Extending the work of building the network of protective factors around children

Each of these changes is small, but they combine to change the culture of early care and learning. Programs shift from focusing on children to genuinely serving and strengthening whole families. Trust-based relationships, genuine engagement of parents as partners, and mutual support among parents and staff help build a strong network of protective factors around each child.

These are practices that can and should become second nature to early learning and child care providers – both home- and center-based. In fact, the practice of building the network of protective factors that lead to children's healthy development and success in school and life should become an integral part of all the systems that serve infants and young children.





What Comes Next?

Theory of change:

A roadmap to mobilizing resources in Washington

Strengthening Families Washington is guided by the principle that small but significant changes have the power to mobilize extraordinary resources to strengthen families.

With this in mind, the steering committee of Strengthening Families Washington documented its roadmap to create change from the top down and from the ground up. This “Theory of Change” is illustrated as a graphic representation of the resources, values, strategies, outcomes, and goals of the initiative. The graphic depicts a unique pathway, from the foundational belief system and strategies to the outcomes for positive social change in the lives of individuals, organizations and the community.

To learn more about the Strengthening Families Theory of Change, please visit our website at: <http://www.wcpcan.wa.gov/sfece/providers.htm#Change>

To learn more about the Theory of Change process see the Aspen Institute webpage at: <http://www.theoryofchange.org/>

Working together to achieve our goals

The goals of Strengthening Families Washington are simple and clear:

1. Increase the number of children who live in safe, stable and supportive families,
2. Increase the number or children who experience healthy social emotional development, and
3. Increase the number of children who are healthy and ready for school.

Achievement of these goals is another way of stating (and measuring) the goal of preventing child abuse and neglect.

After almost two years of exploring and implementing the Strengthening Families approach, partners have committed to a number of strategies to achieve these goals:

- Engage strategic partners and conduct strategic outreach and communications,
- Identify and act on strategic opportunities to embed Strengthening Families strategies in all systems that serve young children,
- Promote incorporation of the Strengthening Families approach and protective factors into the professional development offered to early learning providers and the staff of state agency and statewide organizations, and provide training for Family Friend and Neighbor, foster care and other caregivers,
- Directly promote the implementation of family-strengthening activities in child care and early learning programs, and
- Support community engagement and parent leadership development activities such as parent- and caregiver-led Community Cafes that incorporate the protective factor framework.

Strengthening Families Washington organizational partners have already begun activities to implement each of these strategies, and new partners are sought to strengthen, deepen and expand the work.

Opportunities for Policy and System Change

The experience of the pilot sites has affirmed the power of focusing on strengths, building the network of protective factors around every child and his or her family, and honoring, supporting and listening to parents. Equally important, the experience of the pilot sites points the way toward improving the effectiveness of all the agencies and organizations that touch the lives of young children. The next steps are for state partners and parent leaders to begin the work of embedding the Strengthening Families approach in all existing child-serving systems. Efforts to integrate the Strengthening Families principles in all infant- and child-serving agencies – and, at the same time, to enhance cross-system collaboration – promise even more effective efforts to build on protective factors and produce even greater benefits for young children.

Some of the system changes Strengthening Families Washington seeks have already been initiated through the powerful connections that have been made between the initiative's partner organizations as they have worked together towards common goals. The shared conversation, risk-taking, power- and resource-sharing, and problem-solving that characterize the work of the Strengthening Families steering committee has made it a model for broader collaboration. But to bring this model to scale across the state will require changes at the organizational leadership and policy levels of all our child-serving systems and agencies.

A higher level of collaboration is essential to achieve two critical system change goals:

- Institutionalizing the Strengthening Families approach across systems, and
- Increasing the availability of and access to family support services locally and statewide.

Strengthening Families Washington and the national Strengthening Families Initiative have identified key opportunities to enhance existing systems and policies.

Immediate Opportunities

Build a focus on the protective factors into quality improvement efforts in early care and learning.

The Strengthening Families approach to bolstering protective factors should be integrated into efforts to improve the quality of early learning and child care.

Proposed strategies:

1. Revise tools such as the Quality Rating Scale (QRS) for early care and education centers, the Quality Systems Review (QSR), and the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for child welfare systems to reflect a Strengthening Families approach to working with children and families.
2. Revise the standards for licensing child care programs to incorporate a focus on protective factors, making such approaches the norm for early care and education.

3. Include assistance and trainings around the state for new child care workers and providers about Strengthening Families and the protective factor framework.

Incorporate the Strengthening Families focus on protective factors in professional development.

The Strengthening Families focus on protective factors should be incorporated into preparatory and ongoing education and training, both formal and informal, for all people who work with young children and families.

Proposed strategies:

1. Integrate a focus on the protective factors into university, college, continuing education, and certificate programs for all those who work with children and families.
2. Embed the Strengthening Families approach and protective factors into the training required for state child welfare workers.
3. Develop online and distance learning opportunities to make professional development more widely accessible.
4. Use conferences to provide training and information to groups of professionals.

Work towards early childhood systems integration.

Multiple structures, systems, and initiatives are part of our state's early childhood infrastructure. There is a need to coordinate across these diverse structures. This will require a common language and a consistent focus on building the network of protective factors that children need in every sphere of their lives. Integrating these structures will enhance school readiness, and, if implemented in partnership with schools, support ongoing student success.

Proposed strategies:

1. Use Strengthening Families to help support the adoption of a common language and set of goals across multiple child serving systems, as demonstrated by the linkage established within Washington's Early Childhood Comprehensive System plan, Kids Matter.
2. Funding and guidelines for child care are housed in two different state agencies, the Department of Early Learning and the Department of Social and Health Services' Economic Services Administration (which administers the TANF program). Both should be involved in implementing the core ideas and strategies of Strengthening Families, which could become the catalyst for coordination across these systems.
3. The public school system – especially educators who work with children in K-3 – should be included as partners so that the focus on engaging families and building protective factors continues in public schools.

Create stronger links between child welfare and early care and education.

Quality early care and education that incorporates a strong focus on building protective factors has the potential to both reduce the incidence of abuse and neglect and to mitigate some of the negative developmental effects of trauma on children. Coordination between child welfare and early care and education at the policy, procedure, and practice levels is needed to do this. The child welfare system must be responsive to the developmental needs of young children, and early care and education providers need the resources of child welfare to provide support to families at risk. State systems must accommodate non-adversarial collaboration among parents, child welfare professionals, and child care providers to bolster protective factors and strengthen families.

Proposed strategies:

1. Incorporate the Strengthening Families approach and protective factors into the state's child welfare Child and the Family Services Review (CFSR) process and Program Improvement Plan (PIP).
2. Strengthen the differential response system within child welfare that identifies and provides services to families at risk of abuse or neglect before an incident occurs.
3. Integrate early care and education providers into family decision-making child welfare practices, including family team meetings, and coordinated team meetings for families involved in the child welfare system.

Promote and develop parent leadership.

Parents are consistently involved as decision-makers in the planning, implementation, and assessment of Strengthening Families. Parent leadership helps to ensure that programs are responsive to diverse family needs and choices.

Proposed strategies:

1. Create opportunities and designate resources for parent engagement, leadership, participation, training and support for parents such as Community Cafés in implementing the Strengthening Families approach.
2. Find and support opportunities to include parents at all levels of decision-making in local, regional and statewide programs and organizations, and facilitate connections between parent leaders across organizations, systems and initiatives.
3. Use the voices of parents, as they unite around themes in Community Cafés, to inform communities and policy-makers about the concerns and needs of families.

Build organizational capacity for implementing Strengthening Families within early learning settings.


1. Develop a mentoring system for early learning sites interested in embedding the principles of Strengthening Families.
2. Develop/tailor resources and tools for early learning centers.
3. Develop a center/site orientation to Strengthening Families.

Create community linkages to strengthen the web of protective factors for children.

1. Conduct a pilot project establishing community linkages for emergency access to therapists and other critical services for families experiencing crises.
2. Create a template for interagency letters of agreement that reflect the intent to integrate the principles of Strengthening Families.
3. Conduct a pilot project for community collaborations establishing classrooms for children who need intensive services such as therapeutic classroom environments.

Some of these strategies are already in the early stages of implementation. But stronger and more diverse partnerships and collaboration will be needed to change the culture of early care and learning, child welfare, and public schools, and to change conventional wisdom about the importance of building a strong web of protective factors around all children.





Bringing Strengthening Families to Scale in Washington

The start-up phase of the Strengthening Families Washington initiative is over. Now it's time to take all that has been learned from the pilot sites, parent leaders, and partners, and to bring the Strengthening Families approach to scale. Our ultimate goal is to strengthen the web of protective factors around every child in our state.

As Strengthening Families Washington moves into its third year this fall, new partners have begun to take up work on some key strategies. For example, United Ways of Washington is working with Strengthening Families Washington to secure funding for a collaborative project. The project will build on the current momentum by providing local United Ways with easily adaptable tools they can use to embed the Strengthening Families approach and protective factors in their early learning work. If funded, the project will also provide 211 operators with training on the protective factors.

A partnership with the Family Friends and Neighbor (FFN) program is also underway. Leaders of Washington's FFN network have re-committed to incorporating the Strengthening Families approach into efforts made possible by new funding.

Ongoing efforts seek to bring new partners to the table, and to spread the benefits of this approach throughout our state.

The hard work of the parents and providers in our pilot sites, our collaborative steering committee, and our many partners are paying off. According to the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds and the Strengthening Families national leadership, Washington's work is a cut above efforts undertaken in many other states. Federal agencies such as the Administration for Children and Families Office of Child Abuse and the Department of Health's Maternal Child Health Bureau have recognized Strengthening Families Washington as exemplary.

Still, these early achievements are just a beginning.

We know that stronger and more diverse partnerships and collaboration are essential to change the culture of early care and learning, child welfare, public education, and conventional wisdom about the importance of building a strong web of protective factors around all children.



Strengthening Families Washington's experiences over the last 18-plus months confirms that making this change is doable, affordable, and supported by parents and providers.

And most important, it's the right thing to do for children.

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Resources

For the information contained in this report and for additional resources, please visit the following Strengthening Families websites:

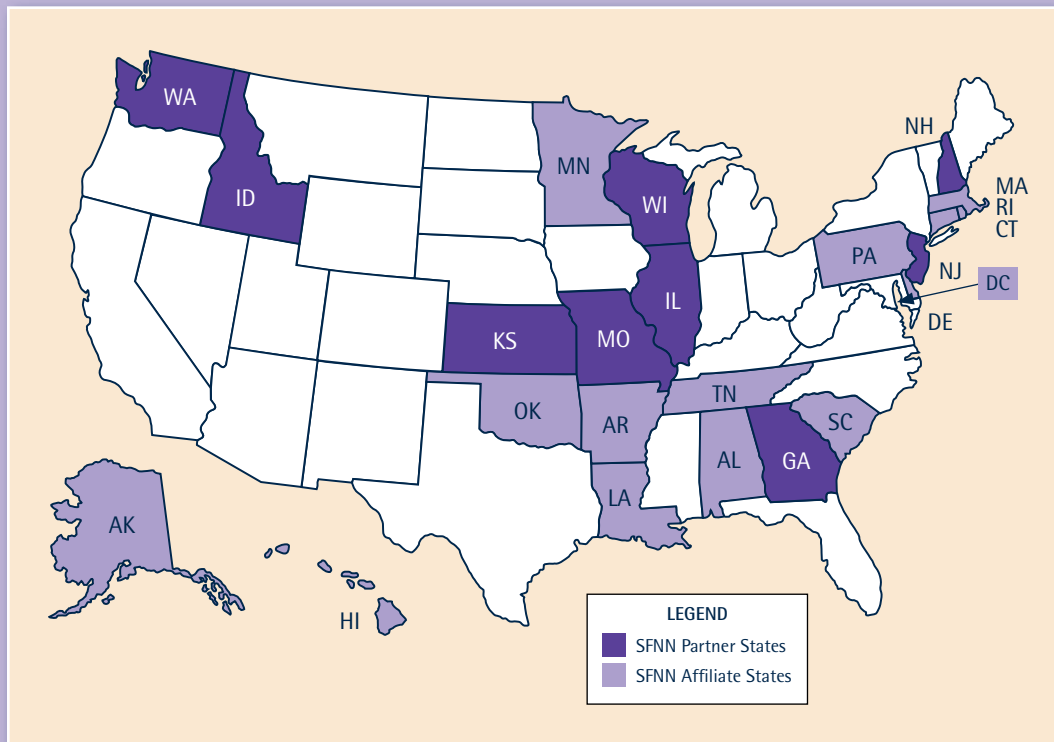
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